E V E R Y N O T E P L A Y E D

*a novel*

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SCOUT PRESS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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# PROLOGUE

Richard is playing the second movement of Schumann’s Fantasie in C Major, op. 17, the final piece of his solo recital at the Adrienne Arsht Center in Miami. The concert hall is sold-out, yet the energy here doesn’t feel full. This venue doesn’t carry the prestige or intimidating pressure of Lincoln Center or the Royal Albert Hall. Maybe that’s it.

This recital is no big deal.

Without a conductor or orchestra behind him, all audience eyes are on him. He prefers this. He loves possessing their undivided attention, the adrenaline rush of being the star. Playing solo is his version of skydiving.

But this entire night, he’s noticed that he’s playing on top of the notes, not inside them. His thoughts are drifting elsewhere, to the steak dinner he’s going to eat back at the

1

hotel, to the self-conscious examination of his imperfect posture, criticizing the flatness of his performance, aware of himself instead of losing himself.

He’s technically flawless. Not many pianists alive today could traverse this demandingly fast and complex section without error. He normally loves playing this piece, especially the bombastic chords of the second movement, its power and grandiosity. Yet, he’s not emotionally connected to any of it.

He trusts that most, if not all, of the people in the audience aren’t sophisticated enough to hear the difference. Hell, most people have probably never even heard Schumann’s Fantasie in C Major, op. 17. It forever breaks his heart that millions listen to Justin Bieber all day long and will live and die without ever hearing Schumann or Liszt or Chopin.

*Being married is more than wearing a ring* comes to mind. Karina said this to him some years ago. Tonight, he’s just wearing the ring. He’s mailing it in, and he’s not sure why. He’ll get through this last piece and have another chance here tomorrow night before flying out to LA. Five more weeks of this tour. It’ll be summer by the time he gets home. Good. He loves summer in Boston.

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He plays the final phrasing of the third-movement adagio, and the notes are gentle, solemn, hopeful. He’s often moved to tears at this point, a permeable conduit for this exquisite expression of tender vulnerability, but tonight he’s unaffected. He doesn’t feel hopeful.

He plays the final note, and the sound lingers on the

**𝅘𝅥𝅯** stage before dissipating, floating away. A moment of quiet

2

stillness hangs in the hall, and then the bubble is punctured by applause. Richard stands and faces the audience. He hinges at the waist, his fingers grazing the bottom of his tuxedo jacket, bowing. The people rise to their feet. The houselights are up a bit now, and he can see their faces, smiling, enthusiastic, appreciating him, in awe of him. He bows again.

He is loved by everyone.

And no one.

every note played

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3

# ONE YEAR LATER

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## CHAPTER ONE

If Karina had grown up fifteen kilometers down the road in either direction north or south, in Gliwice or Bytom instead of Zabrze, her whole life would be different. Even as a child, she never doubted this. Location matters in destiny as much as it does in real estate.

In Gliwice, it was every girl’s birthright to take ballet. The ballet teacher there was Miss Gosia, a former celebrated prima ballerina for the Polish National Ballet prior to Russian martial law, and because of this, it was considered a perk to raise daughters in otherwise grim Gliwice, an unrivaled privilege that every young girl would have access to such an accomplished teacher. These girls grew up wearing leotards and buns and tulle-spun hopes of pirouetting their way out of Gliwice someday. Without

7

knowing specifically what has become of the girls who grew up in Gliwice, she’s sure that most, if not all, remain firmly anchored where they began and are now schoolteachers or miners’ wives whose unrequited ballerina dreams have been passed on to their daughters, the next generation of Miss Gosia’s students.

If Karina had grown up in Gliwice, she would most certainly not have become a ballerina. She has horrible feet, wide, clumsy flippers with virtually no arch, a sturdy frame cast on a long torso and short legs, a body built more for milking cows than for pas de bourrée. She would never have been Miss Gosia’s star pupil. Karina’s parents would have put an end to bartering valuable coal and eggs for ballet lessons long before pointe shoes. Had her life started in Gliwice, she’d still be in Gliwice.

The girls down the road in Bytom had no ballet lessons. The children in Bytom had the Catholic Church. The boys were groomed for the priesthood, the girls the convent. Karina might have become a nun had she grown up in Bytom. Her parents would’ve been so proud. Maybe her life would be content and honorable had she chosen God.

But her life was never really a choice. She grew up in Zabrze, and in Zabrze lived Mr. Borowitz, the town’s piano teacher. He didn’t have a prestigious pedigree like Miss Gosia’s or a professional studio. Lessons were taught in his living room, which reeked of cat piss, yellowing books, and cigarettes. But Mr. Borowitz was a fine teacher. He was dedicated, stern but encouraging, and most im**𝅘𝅥𝅯** portant, he taught every one of his pupils to play Chopin.

lisa genova

8

In Poland, Chopin is as revered as Pope John Paul II and God. Poland’s Holy Trinity.

Karina wasn’t born with the lithe body of a ballerina, but she was graced with the strong arms and long fingers of a pianist. She still remembers her first lesson with Mr. Borowitz. She was five. The glossy keys, the immediacy of pleasing sound, the story of the notes told by her fingers. She took to it instantly. Unlike most children, she never had to be ordered to practice. Quite the opposite, she had to be told to stop. *Stop playing, and do your homework. Stop playing, and set the dinner table. Stop playing, it’s time for bed*. She couldn’t resist playing. She still can’t.

Ultimately, piano became her ticket out of oppressive Poland, to Curtis and America and everything after. *Everything* after. That single decision—to learn piano—set everything that was to follow in motion, the ball in her life’s Rube Goldberg machine. She wouldn’t be here, right now, attending Hannah Chu’s graduation party, had she never played piano.

She parks her Honda behind a Mercedes, the last in a conga line of cars along the side of the road at least three blocks from Hannah’s house, assuming this is the closest she’ll get. She checks the clock on the dash. She’s a half hour late. Good. She’ll make a brief appearance, offer her congratulations, and leave.

every note played

Her heels click against the street as she walks, a human metronome, and her thoughts continue in pace with this rhythm. Without piano, she would never have met Richard. What would her life be like had she never met him? How many hours has she spent indulging in this fantasy? **𝅘𝅥𝅯**

9

If added up, the hours would accumulate into days and weeks, possibly more. More time wasted. What could’ve been. What will never be.

Maybe she would’ve been satisfied had she never left her home country to pursue piano. She’d still be living with her parents, sleeping in her childhood bedroom. Or she’d be married to a boring man from Zabrze, a coal miner who earns a hard but respectable living, and she’d be a homemaker, raising their five children. Both wretched scenarios appeal to her now for a commonality she hates to acknowledge: a lack of loneliness.

Or what if she had attended Eastman instead of Curtis? She almost did. That single, arbitrary choice. She would never have met Richard. She would never have taken a step back, assuming with the arrogant and immortal optimism of a twenty-five-year-old that she’d have another chance, that the Wheel of Fortune’s spin would once again tick to a stop with its almighty arrow pointing directly at her. She’d waited years for another turn. Sometimes life gives you only one.

But then, if she’d never met Richard, their daughter, Grace, wouldn’t be here. Karina imagines an alternative reality in which her only daughter was never conceived and catches herself enjoying the variation almost to the point of wishing for it. She scolds herself, ashamed for allowing such a horrible thought. She loves Grace more than anything else. But the truth is, having Grace was another critical, fork-in-the-road, Gliwice-versus- Bytom-

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versus-Zabrze moment. *Left* brought Grace and tied **𝅘𝅥𝅯** Karina to Richard, the rope tight around her neck like a

10

leash or a noose, depending on the day, for the next seventeen years. *Right* was the path not chosen. Who knows where that might’ve led?

Regret shadows her every step, a dog at her heels, as she now follows the winding stone path into the Chu family’s backyard. Hannah was accepted to Notre Dame, her first choice. Another piano student off to college. Hannah won’t continue with piano there. Like most of Karina’s students, Hannah took lessons because she wanted to add “plays piano” to her college application. The parents have the same motive, often exponentially more intense and unapologetic. So Hannah went through the motions, and their weekly half hour together was a soulless chore for both student and teacher.

A rare few of Karina’s students authentically like playing, and a couple even have talent and potential, but none of them love it enough to pursue it. You have to love it. She can’t blame them. These kids are all overscheduled, stressed-out, and too focused on getting into “the best” college to allow the nourishment passion needs to grow. A flower doesn’t blossom from a seed without the persistent love of sun and water.

every note played

But Hannah isn’t just one of Karina’s piano students. Hannah was Grace’s closest friend from the age of six through middle school. Playdates, sleepovers, Girl Scouts, soccer, trips to the mall and the movies—for most of Grace’s childhood, Hannah was like a younger sister. When Grace moved up to the high school and Hannah remained in middle school, the girls migrated naturally into older and younger social circles. There was never a falling-out. **𝅘𝅥𝅯**

11

Instead, the friends endured a passive drifting on calm currents to separate but neighboring islands. They visited from time to time.

Hannah’s graduation milestone shouldn’t mean much to Karina, but it feels monumental, as if she’s sustaining a bigger loss than another matriculated piano student. It trips the switch of memories from this time last year, and it’s the end of Grace’s childhood all over again. Karina leaves her card for Hannah on the gift table and sighs.

Even though Hannah’s at the far end of the expansive backyard, Karina spots her straightaway, standing on the edge of the diving board, laughing, a line of wet girls and boys behind her, mostly boys in the pool, cheering her name, goading her to do something. Karina waits to see what it will be. Hannah launches into the air and cannonballs into the water, splashing the parents gathered near the pool. The parents complain, wiping water from their arms and faces, but they’re smiling. It’s a hot day, and the momentary spray probably felt refreshing. Karina notices Hannah’s mom, Pam, among them.

Now that Hannah is moving to Indiana, Karina assumes she won’t see Pam at all anymore. They stopped their Thursday-night wine dates some time ago, not long after Grace started high school. Over the past couple of years, their friendship dwindled to the handful of unfulfilling moments before or after Hannah’s weekly piano lesson. Tasked with shuttling her three kids to and from a dizzying schedule of extracurricular activities all over **𝅘𝅥𝅯** town, Pam was often too rushed to even come inside and

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12

waited for Hannah in her running car. Karina waved to her from the front door every Tuesday at 5:30 as Pam pulled away.

Karina almost didn’t come today. She feels self- conscious about showing up alone. Naturally introverted, she’d been extremely private about her marriage and even more shut-in about her divorce. Assuming Richard didn’t air their dirty laundry either, and that’s a safe bet, no one knows the details. So the gossip mill scripted the drama it wasn’t supplied. Someone has to be right, and someone has to be wrong. Based on the hushed stares, vanished chitchat, and pulled plastic smiles, Karina knows how she’s been cast.

The women in particular sympathize with him. Of course they do. They paint him as a sainted celebrity. He deserves to be with someone more elegant, someone who appreciates how extraordinary he is, someone more his equal. They assume she’s jealous of his accomplishments, resentful of his acclaim, bitter about his fame. She’s nothing but a rinky-dink suburban piano teacher instructing disinterested sixteen-year-olds on how to play Chopin. She clearly doesn’t have the self-esteem to be the wife of such a great man.

every note played

They don’t know. They don’t know a damn thing.

Grace just finished her freshman year at the University of Chicago. Karina had anticipated that Grace would be home for the summer by now and would be at Hannah’s party, but Grace decided to stay on campus through the summer, interning on a project with her math professor. Something about statistics. Karina’s proud of her **𝅘𝅥𝅯**

13

daughter for being selected for the internship and thinks it’s a great opportunity, and yet, there’s that pang in Karina’s stomach, the familiar letdown. Grace could’ve chosen to come home, to spend the summer with her mother, but she didn’t. Karina knows it’s ridiculous to feel slighted, forsaken even, but her emotions sit on the throne of her intellect. This is how she’s built, and like any castle, her foundational stones aren’t easily rearranged.

Her divorce became absolute in September of Grace’s senior year, and exactly one year later, Grace moved a thousand miles away. First Richard left. Then Grace. Karina wonders when she’ll get used to the silence in her home, the emptiness, the memories that hang in each room as real as the artwork on the walls. She misses her daughter’s voice chatting on the phone; her giggling girlfriends; her shoes in every room; her hair elastics, towels, and clothes on the floor; the lights left on. She misses her daughter.

She does not miss Richard. When he moved out, his absence felt more like a new presence than a subtraction. The sweet calm that took up residence after he left filled more space than his human form and colossal ego ever did. She did not miss him then or now.

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But going to these kinds of family events alone, without a husband, tilts her off-balance as if she were one cheek atop a two-legged stool. So in that sense, she misses him. For the stability. She’s forty-five and divorced. Single. In Poland, she’d be considered a disgrace. But she’s been

**𝅘𝅥𝅯** in America now for over half her life. Her situation is

14

common in this secular culture and imposes no shame. Yet, she feels ashamed. You can take the girl out of Poland, but you can’t take Poland out of the girl.

Not recognizing any of the other parents, she takes a deep breath and begins the long, awkward walk alone over to Pam. Karina spent an absurdly long time getting ready for this party. Which dress, which shoes, which earrings? She blew out her hair. She even got a manicure yesterday. For what? It’s not as if she’s trying to impress Hannah or Pam or any of the parents. And it’s not as if there will be any single men here, not that she’s looking for a man anyway.

She knows why. She’ll be damned if anyone here looks at her and thinks, *Poor Karina. Her life’s a mess, and she looks it, too*. The other reason is Richard. Pam and Scott Chu are his friends, too. Richard was probably invited. She could’ve asked Pam if Richard was on the guest list—not that it mattered, just to be forewarned— but she chickened out.

So there it is, the stomach-turning possibility that he might be here, and the even more putrid thought that he might show up with the latest skinny little twentysomething tart hanging on his arm and every self-important word. Karina rubs her lips together, making sure her lipstick hasn’t clumped.

every note played

Her eyes poke around the yard. He’s not standing with Pam and the cluster of parents by the pool house. Karina scans the pool, the grilling island, the lawn. She doesn’t see him.

She arrives at the pool house and inserts herself into **𝅘𝅥𝅯**

15

the circle of Pam and Scott and other parents. Their voices instantly drop, their eyes conspiring. Time pauses.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Karina asks.

The circle looks to Pam.

“Um . . .” Pam hesitates. “We were just talking about Richard.”

“Oh?” Karina waits, her heart bracing for something humiliating. No one says a word. “What about him?”

“He canceled his tour.”

“Oh.” This isn’t earth-shattering news. He’s canceled gigs and touring dates before. Once, he couldn’t stand the conductor and refused to set foot onstage with him. Another time, Richard had to be replaced last minute because he got drunk at an airport bar and missed his flight. She wonders what reason he has this time. But Pam and Scott and the others stare at her with grave expressions, as if she should have something more compassionate to say on the subject.

Her stomach floods with emotion, her inner streets crowding fast as a fervent protest stands upon its soapbox in her center, outraged that she has to deal with this, that Pam especially can’t be more sensitive to her. Richard’s canceled tour isn’t her concern. She divorced him. His life isn’t her problem anymore.

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“You really don’t know?” asks Pam.

They all wait for her answer, lips shut, bodies still, an audience engrossed in watching a play.

“What? What, is he dying or something?” A nervous half-laugh escapes her, and the sound finds

**𝅘𝅥𝅯** no harmony. She searches the circle of parents for connec-

16

tion, even if the comment was slightly inappropriate, for someone to forgive her a bit of dark humor. But everyone either looks horrified or away. Everyone but Pam. Her eyes betray a reluctant nod.

“Karina, he has ALS.”

every note played

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17